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## PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN ANTHROPOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

By FRANZ BOAS

The science of anthropology deals with the biological and mental manifestations of human life as they appear in different races and in different societies. The phenomena with which we are dealing are therefore, from one point of view, historical. We are endeavoring to elucidate the events which have led to the formation of human types, past and present, and which have determined the course of cultural development of any given group of men. From another point of view the same phenomena are the objects of biological and psychological investigations. We are endeavoring to ascertain what are the laws of hereditary stability and of environmental variability of the human body. These may be recognized in the historical changes that the bodily appearance of man has undergone in the course of time, and in his displacement from one geographical or social environment to another. We are also trying to determine the psychological laws which control the mind of man everywhere, and that may differ in various racial and social groups. In so far as our inquiries relate to the last-named subject, their problems are problems of psychology, though based upon anthropological material. I intend to speak of this aspect of anthropology to-day.

The fundamental problem on which all anthropological inquiry must be founded relates to the mental equipment of the various races of man. Are all the races of mankind mentally equally endowed, or do material differences exist? The final answer to this question has not been given, but anatomical observations on the various races suggest that differences in the form of the nervous system are presumably accompanied by differences in function, or, psychologically speaking, that the mental traits which characterize different individuals are distributed in varying manner among different races; so that the composite picture of the mental characteristics of one race would presumably not coincide with the composite picture of the mental characteristics of another race. The evidence that has been brought forward does not justify us,

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however, in claiming that the characteristics of one race would be an advance over those of another, although they would be different.

This question has also been approached from the standpoint of racial achievement. It has been pointed out that only the white race and the Mongolian race have reached any high grade of cultural development, and on this basis it has been assumed that the other races of man have not the ability to reach the same grade of civilization. It has been shown, however, that the retardation of the other races is not necessarily significant, because the amount of retardation is small as compared to the time consumed in reaching the present stages. It would seem, therefore, that the weight of evidence is, on the whole, in favor of an essential similarity of mental endowment in different races, with the probability of variations in the type of mental characteristics. Further inquiries into this subject must be based not only on sociological studies, but also on anatomical, physiological, and psychological inquiries among individuals belonging to the distinct races of mankind.

While the problem that I have just outlined relates to hereditary racial differences, a second fundamental problem of anthropology relates to the mental characteristics of social groups regardless of their racial descent. Even a superficial observation demonstrates that groups of man belonging to distinct social strata do not behave in the same manner. The Russian peasant does not react to his sense experiences in the same way as does the native Australian; and entirely different from theirs are the reactions of the educated Chinaman and of the educated American. In all these cases the form of reaction may depend to a slight extent upon hereditary individual and racial ability, but it will to a much greater extent be determined by the habitual reactions of the society to which the individual in question belongs.

The reaction of a member of a society to the outer world may be twofold. He may act as a member of a crowd, in which case his activities are immediately determined by imitation of the activities of his fellows; or he may act as an individual; then the influence of the society of which he is a member will make itself felt by the habits of action and thought of the individual.

I have discussed the racial question repeatedly at other places. The problem of the psychology of the crowd is a peculiarly intricate one, based largely upon the data of social psychology in a wider sense of the term, and upon data of individual psychology. I may be allowed for these reasons to confine myself to-day to the third of the problems which I have

outlined, that of the psychological laws which govern man as an individual member of society.

This problem has been the object of intensive study by the great minds that have laid the foundation of modern anthropology. The ultimate aim of Waitz's great work is the inquiry into the question whether there are any fundamental differences between the mental make-up of mankind the world over, racially as well as socially. Tylor, in his brilliant investigations on the development of civilization, showed the common occurrence of similar types of ideas the world over, and demonstrated the possibility of conceiving of the scattered phenomena as proof of certain tendencies of evolution of civilization. The many investigators who have studied the evolution of marriage relations, the evolution of law, of art, of religion, all start from the same basis—the assumption of a general similarity of mental reaction in societies of similar structure. Bastian has tried to prove by the use of anthropological data that man the world over develops the same elementary ideas, on which the fabric of his mental activities is based; and that these elementary ideas may be modified by geographical and social environment, but that they remain essentially the same everywhere.

It may be well to illustrate the facts here referred to by a few examples. In the domain of industrial activity we find that mankind is everywhere in possession of the art of producing fire by friction, that everywhere food is prepared by cooking, that shelters are built, that tools are used for breaking and cutting. We do not know mankind in any stage where any of these inventions are absent. In regard to social structure we find that man nowhere lives alone; that even the cases in which the social group consists of members of one family only, are exceedingly rare and of temporary occurrence. We furthermore find that the social units are subdivided into groups, which are kept apart by customary laws forbidding intermarriages in one group, and prescribing intermarriages in another.

In the domain of religion an idea of this type is that of life after death. There is probably no people that believes in the complete extinction of existence with death, but some belief in the continuity of life seems to exist everywhere. To the same domain belongs that type of concepts of the world, in which the surface of our earth is considered as forming a central level, above and below which other worlds are located.

An examination of the types of ideas represented by the few examples that I have here given shows that their subject-matter is highly complex, and that in a strict sense the occurrence of these ideas by itself does not explain clearly the psychological

processes that produce them and that cause their stability. Attempts at a psychological interpretation of these concepts have often been made by means of a comparative treatment of similar ideas, and by endeavors to arrange these ideas in such a way as to show a more or less rationalistic development of one from the other. While this may be feasible in some cases, it does not seem likely that this method of treatment will lead us to the most generalized laws governing the forms of thought in human societies.

The principal obstacle in the way of progress on these lines seems to my mind to be founded on the lack of comparability of the data with which we are dealing. When, for instance, we speak of the idea of life after death as one of the ideas which develop in human society as a psychological necessity, we are dealing with a most complex group of data. One people believes that the soul continues to exist in the form that the person had at the time of death, without any possibility of change; another one believes that the soul will be reborn in a child of the same family; a third one believes that the souls will enter the bodies of animals; and still others that the shadows continue our human pursuits, waiting to be led back to our world in a distant future. The emotional and rationalistic elements which enter into these various concepts are entirely distinct; and we can readily perceive how the various forms of the idea of a future life may have come into existence by psychological processes that are not at all comparable. If I may be allowed to speculate on this question, I might imagine that in one case the similarities between children and their deceased relatives, in other cases the memory of the deceased as he lived during the last days of his life, in still other cases the longing for the beloved child or parent, and again the fear of death—may all have contributed to the development of the idea of life after death, the one here, the other there.

Another instance will corroborate this point of view. One of the striking forms of social organization, which occurs in many regions wide apart, is what we call totemism,—a form of society in which certain social groups consider themselves as related in a supernatural way to a certain species of animals or to a certain class of objects. I believe this is the generally accepted definition of totemism; but I am convinced that in this form the phenomenon is not a single psychological problem, but embraces the most diverse psychological elements. In some cases the people believe themselves to be descendants of the animal whose protection they enjoy. In other cases an animal or some other object may have appeared to an ancestor of the social group, and may have promised to become his protector, and the friendship between the animal and the ancestor

was then transmitted to his descendants. In still other cases a certain social group in a tribe may have the power of securing by magical means and with great ease a certain kind of animal or of increasing its numbers, and the supernatural relation may be established in this way. It will be recognized that here again the anthropological phenomena, which are in outward appearances alike, are, psychologically speaking, entirely distinct, and that consequently psychological laws covering all of them can not be deduced from them.

Another example may not be amiss. In a general review of moral standards we observe, that, with increasing civilization, a gradual change in the valuation of actions takes place. Among primitive man human life has little value, and is sacrificed on the slightest provocation. The social group among whose members any altruistic obligations are binding is exceedingly small; and outside of the group any action that may result in personal gain is not only permitted, but even approved; and from this starting point we find an ever-increasing valuation of human life and an extension of the size of the group among whose members altruistic obligations are binding. The modern relations of nations show that this evolution has not yet reached its final stage. It might seem, therefore, that a study of the social conscience in relation to crimes like murder might be of psychological value, and lead to important results, clearing up the origin of ethical values; but I think here the same objections may be raised as before, namely the lack of comparable motives. The person who slays an enemy in revenge for wrongs done, a youth who kills his father before he gets decrepit in order to enable him to continue a vigorous life in the world to come, a father who kills his child as a sacrifice for the welfare of his people, act from such entirely different motives, that psychologically a comparison of their activities does not seem permissible. It would seem much more proper to compare the murder of an enemy in revenge, with destruction of his property for the same purpose, or to compare the sacrifice of a child on behalf of the tribe with any other action performed on account of strong altruistic motives, than to base our comparison on the common concept of murder.

Similar observations may also be made in the domain of art. The artist who tries to display his skill in handling his material will be led to æsthetic results. Another one, who wishes to imitate certain forms in his work, may be led to similar results. Notwithstanding similarity of results, the psychological processes in these two cases are quite distinct and not comparable.

For these reasons it seems to me that one of the fundamental points to be borne in mind in the development of anthropological psychology is the necessity of looking for the

common psychological features, not in the outward similarities of ethnic phenomena, but in the similarity of psychological processes so far as these can be observed or inferred.

Let us next consider in what direction the psychological problems of anthropology have to be looked for. I must confine myself here to a very few examples of what seem to me fundamental psychological facts.

One of the most striking features in the thoughts of primitive people is the peculiar manner in which concepts that appear to us alike and related are separated and re-arranged. According to our views the constituting elements of the heavens and of the weather are all inanimate objects; but to the mind of primitive man they appear to belong to the organic world. The dividing-line between man and animal is not sharply drawn. What seem to us conditions of an object—like health and sickness—are considered by him as independent realities. In short, the whole classification of experience among mankind living in different forms of society follows entirely distinct lines. I believe this subject can be made clear most easily by a comparison with a similar phenomenon in languages.

If the whole mass of concepts, with all their variants, were expressed in language by entirely heterogeneous and unrelated sound complexes, a condition would arise in which closely related ideas would not show their relationship by the corresponding relationship of their phonetic signs. An infinitely large number of distinct sound complexes—in other words, of distinct words—would be required for expression. If this were the case, the association between an idea and its representative sound complex would not become sufficiently stable to be reproduced automatically at any given moment, without reflecting. The automatic and rapid use of language has brought it about that the infinitely large number of ideas have been reduced by classification to a lesser number, which by constant use have established firm associations, and which can be used automatically. It seems important to emphasize the fact that the groups of ideas expressed by specific words show very material differences in different languages, and do not conform by any means to the same principles of classification. To take the example of English. We find that the idea of water is expressed in a great variety of forms. One term serves to express water as a liquid; another one, water in the form of a large expanse, a lake; others, water as running in a large body or in a small body, a river and brook. Still other terms express water in the forms of rain, dew, wave, and foam. It is perfectly conceivable that this variety of ideas, each of which is expressed by a single independent term in English, might be expressed in other lan-

guages by derivations from the same term. It seems fairly evident that the selection of simple terms must to a certain extent depend upon the chief interests of a people; and where it is necessary to distinguish a certain phenomenon in many varieties, which in the life of a people play each an entirely independent rôle, many independent words may develop, while in other cases modifications of a single term may suffice. In the same way as concepts are classified and groups of perceptions are expressed by a single term, relations between perceptions are also classified. The behavior of primitive man makes it perfectly clear that all these linguistic classes have never risen into consciousness, and that consequently their origin must be sought not in rational, but in entirely unconscious processes of the mind. They must be due to a grouping of sense impressions and of concepts which is not in any sense of the term voluntary, but which develops from entirely different psychological causes. It is a characteristic of linguistic classifications that they never rise into consciousness, while other classifications, although the same unconscious origin prevails, often do rise into consciousness. It seems very plausible, for instance, that the fundamental religious notions, like the idea of will power immanent in inanimate objects, or the anthropomorphic character of animals, are in their origin just as little conscious as the fundamental ideas of language. While, however, the use of language is so automatic that the opportunity never arises for the fundamental notions to emerge into consciousness, this happens very frequently in all phenomena relating to religion.

I believe that anthropological investigations carried on from this point of view offer a fruitful field of inquiry. The primary object of these researches would be the determination of the fundamental categories under which phenomena are classified by man in various stages of culture. Differences of this kind appear very clearly in the domain of certain simple sense-perceptions. For instance, it has been observed that colors are classified according to their similarities in quite distinct groups without any accompanying difference in the ability to differentiate shades of color. What we call green and blue are often combined under some such term as "gall-like color," or yellow and green are combined into one concept, which may be named "young-leaves color." The importance of the fact that in thought and in speech these color-names convey the impression of quite different groups of sensations can hardly be over-rated.

Another group of categories that promise a field of fruitful investigation are those of object and attribute. The concepts of primitive man make it quite clear that the classes of ideas



which we consider as attributes are often considered as independent objects. The best-known case of this kind, one to which I have referred incidentally before, is that of sickness. While we consider sickness as a condition of an organism, it is believed by primitive man, and even by many members of our own society, to be an object which may enter the body, and which may be removed. This is exemplified by the numerous cases in which a disease is extracted from the body by sucking or by other processes, in the belief that it may be thrown into people, or that it may be enclosed in wood in order to prevent its return. Other qualities are treated in the same way. Thus the condition of hunger, exhaustion, and similar bodily feelings, are considered by certain primitive tribes as independent objects which affect the body. Even life is believed to be a material object that may become separated from the body. The luminosity of the sun is considered as an object that the Sun himself may put on or lay aside.

I have indicated before that the concept of anthropomorphism seems to be one of the important categories underlying primitive thought. It would seem that the power of motion of the self and the power of motion of an object have led to the inclusion of man and movable objects in the same category, with the consequent imputation of human qualities to the moving objective world.

While in many cases we can see with a fair degree of clearness the fundamental concepts underlying these categories, in other cases these are not by any means clear. Thus the concept of incest groups—those groups in which intermarriage is strictly forbidden—is omnipresent. But no satisfactory explanation has so far been given for the tendency to combine certain degrees of blood relationship under this view-point.

Much material for this field of inquiry is contained in the works on comparative anthropology, but I believe a more thorough psychological analysis of the accumulated data may reveal important new information.

We will now turn to the consideration of another group of psychological phenomena that seem to me of considerable importance. In all forms of society certain groups of activities and of thoughts appear in certain typical associations. Thus in our modern society the consideration of cosmic phenomena is constantly associated with the efforts to give adequate explanations for them, based on the principle of causality. In primitive society the consideration of the same phenomena leads to a number of typical associations which differ from our own, but which occur with remarkable regularity among tribes living in the most remote parts of the world. An excellent instance of this kind is the regular association of obser-

vations relating to cosmic phenomena with purely human happenings; in other words, the occurrence of nature myths. It seems to my mind that the characteristic trait of nature myths is the association between the observed cosmic events and what might be called a novelistic plot based on the form of social life with which people are familiar. The plot as such might as well develop among the peoples themselves; but its association with the heavenly bodies, the thunder-storm, or the wind, makes it a nature myth. The distinction between the folk-tale and the nature myth lies solely in the association of the latter with cosmic phenomena. This association does not naturally develop in modern society. If it is still found every now and then, it is based on the survival of the traditional nature myth. In primitive society, on the other hand, it is found constantly. The investigation of the reason for this association is an attractive problem, the solution of which can only in part be surmised.

A number of other examples will demonstrate that the kind of association here referred to is quite common in primitive life. An excellent instance is furnished by certain characteristics of primitive decorative art. With us almost the sole object of decorative art is æsthetic. We wish to beautify the objects that are decorated. We recognize a certain appropriateness of decorative motives in accordance with the uses to which objects are to be put, and the emotional effect of the decorative motive. In primitive life the conditions are quite different. Extended investigations on decorative art in all continents have proved that practically everywhere the decorative design is associated with a certain symbolic significance. There is hardly a case known where a primitive tribe cannot give some sort of explanation for the designs they use. In some cases the symbolic significance may be exceedingly weak, but ordinarily it is highly developed. The triangular and quadrangular designs of our Plains Indians, for instance, almost always convey definite symbolic meanings. They may be records of warlike deeds, they may be prayers, or they may in some way convey other ideas relating to the supernatural. It would almost seem that among primitive tribes decorative art for its own sake does not exist. The only analogies in modern decorative art are such as the use of the flag, of the cross, or of emblems of secret societies, for decorative purposes; but their frequency is insignificant as compared to the general symbolic tendencies of primitive art. Thus it will be seen that we have here again a type of association in primitive society quite different from the type of association found among ourselves. Among primitive people the æsthetic motive is combined with the symbolic,

while in modern life the æsthetic motive is either quite independent, or associated with utilitarian ideas.

I will give still another example of a form of association characteristic of primitive society. In modern society, social organization, including the grouping of families, is essentially based on blood relationship and on the social functions performed by each individual. Except in so far as the Church concerns itself with birth, marriage, and death, there is no connection between social organization and religious belief. These conditions are quite different in primitive society, where we find an inextricable association of ideas and customs relating to society and to religion. I have referred before to the phenomena of totemism, which are perhaps the best example of this type of association. Totemism is found among many American tribes, as well as in Australia, Melanesia, and in Africa. I have described before its characteristic trait, which consists in supernatural connection that is believed to exist between a certain class of objects, generally animals, and a certain social group. Further analysis shows very clearly that one of the underlying ideas of totemism is the existence of definite groups of man that are not allowed to intermarry, and that the limitations of these groups are determined by considerations of blood relationship. The religious ideas found in totemism refer to the personal relation of man to certain classes of supernatural powers, and the typical trait of totemism is the association of certain kinds of supernatural power with certain social groups. Psychologically, therefore, we may compare totemism with those familiar forms of society in which certain social classes claim privileges by the grace of God, or where the patron saint of a community favors its members with his protection. It will be recognized that we have here again a type of association in primitive society which has completely changed with the development of civilization.

We will now turn to the consideration of a third point, to the peculiar importance of automatic actions in the development of the customs and beliefs of mankind. It is a well-known fact that all those actions which we perform with great frequency are liable to become automatic; that is to say, that their performance is ordinarily not combined with any degree of consciousness. Consequently the emotional value of these actions is also very slight. It is, however, remarkable that the more automatic an action, the more difficult it is to perform the opposite action; that it requires a very strong effort to do so; and that ordinarily the opposite action is accompanied by strong feelings of displeasure. It may also be observed that to see the unusual action performed by another person excites the strongest attention and causes feelings

of displeasure. An example will make clear what I mean. When we consider our table manners, it will readily be recognized that most of them are purely traditional and cannot be given any adequate explanation. Still the constant performance of the actions which constitute good table manners makes it practically impossible for us to act otherwise. An attempt to act differently would not only be difficult on account of the lack of adjustment of muscular motions, but also on account of the strong emotional resistance that we should have to overcome. To eat with people having table manners different from our own seems to us decidedly objectionable and causes feelings of displeasure which may rise to such intensity as to cause qualms. Another good example is the feeling connected with acts that in our society are considered as modest or immodest. Every one will feel instinctively the strong resistance that he would have to overcome, even in a different society, if he were required to perform an action that we are accustomed to consider as immodest, and the feelings that would be excited in his mind if he were thrown into a society in which the standards of modesty differed from our own. It seems to my mind that these feelings of displeasure exert a very strong influence upon the development and conservation of customs. The young child in whom the habitual behavior of his surroundings has not yet developed will acquire much of this behavior by unconscious imitation. In many cases, however, it will act in a way different from the customary behavior, and will be corrected by its elders. This is presumably one of the most important elements that tend to bring customary behavior into the consciousness of the people practising it. When educating their children to conform to the tribal standards, these standards must necessarily become conscious to the educators.

One of the cases in which the development of ideas based on behavior is best traced, is that of the taboo. Although we ourselves have hardly any definite taboos, to an outsider our failure to use certain animals for food might easily appear from this point of view. Supposing an individual accustomed to eating dogs should inquire among us for the reason why we do not eat dogs, we could only reply that it is not customary; and he would be justified in saying that dogs are tabooed among us, just as much as we are justified in speaking of taboos among primitive people. There are a number of cases in which it is at least conceivable that the older customs of a people, under a new surrounding, develop into taboos. I think, for instance, that it is very likely that the Eskimo taboo forbidding the use of caribou and of seal on the same day may be due to the alternating inland and coast life of the people. When they hunt inland, they have no seals, and consequently can eat only

caribou. When they hunt on the coast, they have no caribou, and consequently can eat only seal. The simple fact that in one season only caribou can be eaten, and that in another season only seal can be eaten, may have easily led to a resistance to a change of this custom; so that from the simple fact that for a long period the two kinds of meat could not be eaten at the same time developed the law that the two kinds of meat must not be eaten at the same time. I think it is also likely that the fish taboo of some of our Southwestern tribes may be due to the fact that the tribes lived for a long time in a region where no fish was available, and that the impossibility of obtaining fish developed into the custom of not eating fish.

It would seem, therefore, that we may say in a general way that the customary action is the ethical action, that a breach of custom is everywhere considered as essentially unethical.

It is very likely that the same causes have had a strong influence upon the development of local conventional styles of art. It is no less true that the customary form is liable to be considered the beautiful form than that the customary behavior is considered ethical behavior. Therefore the stability of primitive styles of art may ultimately be due to the same causes as the stability of primitive customs.

If the origin of concepts and of distinct types of association is such as I suggested to-day, and if the existence of these concepts and types of association is brought into the consciousness of primitive man by the incidents of his daily life, when customary concepts and customary associations seem to be broken, we recognize that man must in a great many cases find himself confronted with the fact that certain ideas exist in his mind for which he cannot give any explanation except that they are there. The desire to understand one's own actions, and to get a clear insight into the secrets of the world, manifests itself at a very early time, and it is therefore not surprising that man in all stages of culture begins to speculate on the motives of his own actions.

As I have explained before, there can be no conscious motive for many of these, and for this reason the tendency develops to discover the motives that may determine our customary behavior. This is the reason why in all stages of culture customary actions are made the subject of secondary explanations that have nothing to do with their historical origin, but which are inferences based upon the general knowledge possessed by the people. I think the existence of such secondary interpretations of customary actions is one of the most important anthropological phenomena, and one which is hardly less common in our own society than in more primitive societies. It is a common observation that we desire or act

first, and then try to justify our desires and our actions. When, on account of our early bringing up, we act with a certain political party, most of us are not prompted by a clear conviction of the justice of the principles of our party, but we do so because we have been taught to respect it as the right party to which to belong. Then only do we justify our standpoint by trying to convince ourselves that these principles are the correct ones. Without reasoning of this kind, the stability and geographical distribution of political parties as well as of church denominations would be entirely unintelligible. A candid examination of our own minds convinces us that the average man in by far the majority of cases does not determine his actions by reasoning, but that he first acts, and then justifies or explains his acts by such secondary considerations as are current among us.

That the same conditions prevail to even a greater extent among primitive people can easily be shown by a number of examples. It has been pointed out before that decorative art among primitive people is almost everywhere symbolic. This does not preclude the possibility of designs, and even of the whole style, of one region being borrowed by the people of another region. This has been the case, for instance, among the tribes of our Northwestern Plains, who have borrowed much of their art from their more southern neighbors; but they have not adopted together with it the symbolical interpretations given by their neighbors, but invented interpretations of their own. I imagine that this is the outcome of a mental process which set in when the designs were found pleasing, and, according to the general character of primitive thought, a symbolic interpretation was expected. This was then secondarily invented in accordance with the ideas current among the tribe.

The same observation may be made in primitive mythology. The same kind of tales are current over enormous areas, but the mythological use to which they are put is locally quite different. Thus an ordinary adventure relating to the exploits of some animal may sometimes be made use of to explain some of its peculiar characteristics. At other times it may be made use of to explain certain customs, or even the origin of certain constellations in the sky. There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that the tale as such is older than its mythological significance. The characteristic feature of the development of the nature myth is, first, that the tale has associated itself with attempts to explain cosmic conditions—this has been referred to before—and, secondly, that when primitive man became conscious of the cosmic problem, he ransacked the entire field of his knowledge until he happened

to find something that could be fitted to the problem in question giving an explanation satisfactory to his mind. While the classification of concepts, the types of association, and the resistance to change of automatic acts, developed unconsciously, many of the secondary explanations are due to conscious reasoning.

In the preceding remarks I have tried to point out a direction in which anthropological data may be used to good advantage by the psychologist; that from a psychological point of view, the starting-point of our investigations must not be looked for in anthropological phenomena that happen to be alike in outward appearance, but that in many cases diverse phenomena are based on similar psychic processes, and that these offer to the investigator a promising line of attack.